

Prince Charles and the Duchess, in their element among the farmers and the muck of the countryside

The Prince of Wales and the Duchess of Cornwall were at the market Friday as part of their visit to Ontario's Prince Edward County



His Royal Highness Prince Charles tours the Wellington Farmer's Market in Ontario, Friday June 30, 2017. Peter J. Thompson



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The vendors at the Wellington Farmers Market could tell Prince Charles was approaching from the crowd swirling around him. A woman selling hot sauce dashed up and leaned in to take a photo. She returned to her stall and showed her two young children a photo of the prince.

"When that man comes around," she said, "we all put on our best manners."

The Prince of Wales and the Duchess of Cornwall were at the market Friday as part of their visit to Ontario's Prince Edward County, the second leg of their Royal Tour for Canada's sesquicentennial.



Prince Charles requests a muffin for the road while touring the Wellington Farmer's Market in Ontario, Friday June 30, 2017. Peter J. Thompson

The market tour was a chance for Prince Charles to star in one of his favourite roles, as gentleman farmer. By his own admission, he is most at ease in the countryside. "I just happen to love it," he once told the BBC.

It's fitting then, that Prince Charles came here to Prince Edward County, which has seen its own influx of genteel farmers and winemakers, as well as investment and tourism dollars from Toronto and Montreal, where it has become the preferred place for a weekend sojourn.

Lori Aselstine and her wife, Lorraine Schmid, brought a 1993 edition of a book on Highgrove, the estate the Prince bought in the 1980s and turned into an organic garden, along with the Duchy Home Farm nearby.

"I've read the foreword at least 20 times," Aselstine said, referring to Prince Charles' introduction to the book.

"We are avid consumers of everything he has to say."

His endeavours in organics and the farm-to-table movement have not always earned him praise. In the 1980s, he was cast as an eccentric — a portrait that was helped along by his embrace of naturopathy and his declaration that he spoke directly to his plants. "Very important to talk to them," goes his famous quote from an interview in the mid-'80s.

"They respond."

With any luck, the Highgrove book would draw the Prince into the couples' stall, where they were selling asparagus, garlic scapes, sweet potatoes and herbs from their own organic farm, Thyme Again Gardens, a 20-minute drive north of the market.

It was raining before the Royals arrived and the rain was not welcome, not even for the vendors.

Consistent rain in the region meant the heritage cattle at Thyme Again Gardens were in knee-high muck and an acre of arable land was underwater. One member of the local Rotary Club reported that his friend's property was so flooded there were carp mating on the front lawn.

By the time the Royals arrived, running significantly behind, the sun was out.

It was a typical market, the organizer, Louise McFaul, promised. But it was not. All the regular vendors who show up each week were accounted for, yes. But looking closely, things seemed out of place. (McFaul herself wore a wide-brimmed cream hat with feathers out the top and a dress by a Canadian designer.)

There was a black RCMP boat lurking near the shore, metres from the market; and a man with a coiled earpiece standing facing the bushes on the perimeter; a former president of the local Elks Lodge, in a purple blazer and fez; and agents in loose-fitting trousers glaring at passersby.

The market is also supposed to be held on Saturdays, not Fridays — a concession to meet the needs of the Royal Tour that seemed to perturb the Prince.

"I'm sorry you've had to come on a Friday," he told Natalie Piper, owner of Cloven Farm. He asked if her microgreens were grown in a greenhouse.

"He was right," Piper said, impressed.



Prince Charles tours the Wellington Farmer's Market in Ontario with his wife The Duchess of Cornwall Camilla Parker Bowles, Friday June 30, 2017. Peter J. Thompson

The Prince and the Duchess fanned out, one taking the left side of the aisle of farm stands while the other took the right.

A woman handed the Prince a bouquet of flowers. He smelled them and smiled at her, before passing the flowers to a handler. He stopped at a stand selling baked goods and tried a goat cheese and spinach scone. "Delicious," he said.

Time would not permit a visit at each stall. And as the procession continued, anxiety seemed to build among the vendors.

Aselstine and Schmid, of Thyme Again Gardens, straightened their plate of samples. As the Prince approached, flanked by Ontario Premier Kathleen Wynne, the couple stepped forward, with Aselstine cradling the book on the Highgrove Gardens in her arms.

The Prince walked past slightly. He smiled and for a minute it looked like that was all. Then he stopped and turned towards them.

He talked to them about their heritage cattle and pigs. He, too, raises heritage breeds. When he saw the book, he leaned in.

"That's an old version," he told them.

"It was our Bible right from the beginning," Aselstine said.